

THE COLLEGE CRIMINALS

4. WILLIAM CORDER

by

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Recorder of the Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons of England

A MORE RECENTLY acquired skeleton in this series is that of William Corder (Fig. 1), who was executed for the murder of Maria Marten. William Corder, the youngest son of John and Mary Corder, was born at Polstead in 1805. His father was a prosperous farmer and the four sons, John, Thomas, James and William were all engaged in agricultural work. As a boy, William never seems to have been popular with his school fellows and is said to have been untruthful and dishonest, earning the nickname of "Foxy" as a result of his crafty ways. After he left school, his character was no more attractive. Possibly due to the strictness of his father, he indulged in all kinds of petty deceit. He borrowed money from his father's friends in order to impress his numerous lady acquaintances and also raised the necessary funds by selling some of his father's stock from time to time. Becoming tired of having to disburse quite considerable sums in order to cover up these dubious transactions, William's father decided to send the boy to sea. He was, however, rejected as a candidate on account of his defective eyesight and returned to his work on the farm. He now got into the company of a notorious local thief, known as Samuel Smith, and these two perpetrated several petty robberies in the neighbourhood. After one of these incidents, Smith was unfortunate enough to be arrested, tried and sentenced to be transported for life. Corder was lucky not to be implicated on this particular occasion, though his connection with Smith was well known.

As a younger son, he had had very little to do with the management of the farm, but it now happened that his father and one of his brothers died within a very short space of time. The other two brothers, James and John, suffered from tuberculosis and gradually became too ill to undertake any responsibility so that there was an opportunity for William to mend his ways and prove his worth. For several months William worked well, especially after the death of John when he was left as the main supporter of his mother, and all seemed to be going well until the early part of the year 1826.

In the same village lived a large family of the name of Marten. Thomas Marten, the father, was an agricultural labourer of good reputation among his neighbours. The eldest child was a girl, Maria, who, as was the custom in those days, began to earn a living at the early age of seven. She was placed in a clergyman's home near to Polstead and was occupied partly in domestic work and partly in the nursery where she proved of much use as a result of her experience in looking after her younger brothers and sisters at home. Unfortunately, when Maria was only ten



Fig. 1.

years old, her mother died, and she was needed at home to keep house for her father and the family. This she did so well that she earned the respect and admiration of all the villagers. When she was about 18, however, her father married again and this event seems to have changed Maria from a quiet, industrious girl into a frivolous and pleasure-seeking wanton. She was good-looking and soon found herself a great attraction to the opposite sex. Among her admirers was Thomas Corder and, although the association was kept secret at Corder's request, Maria believed that he was courting her honourably. Corder deserted her, however, and Maria was left with a child which lived only a few weeks. This incident did not tend to improve either her conduct or her reputation in the village and she had many other irregular associations and bore another child, Thomas Henry, before her name was linked with that of William Corder in 1826. Like his brother Thomas, William desired at first that the friendship should be kept secret and the two made a practice of meeting in a barn on the outskirts of the village. However, after it

became apparent that Maria was going to have another child, William courted her openly and announced his intention of marrying her. As the deaths of his father and brothers had left him a comparatively wealthy man, this was considered to be a good match and Thomas Marten in particular was anxious for his erring daughter to settle down to a respectable life. William's mother, on the contrary, did not consider the union favourably, both on account of Maria's misconduct and of the inferior social status of her family. Apartments were taken for Maria in Sudbury, a neighbouring village, but she returned to her parent's home after the birth of the child. This child only lived for two weeks and although William announced that it had been buried at Sudbury, no trace of the burial nor record of its occurrence has ever been found. Quarrels were now frequent between these two young people and there is some doubt whether Maria wished any longer to marry William, but eventually the arrangement was made that Corder should take her to Ipswich where the ceremony would take place. Accordingly, on May 18th, 1827, William called at the Marten's cottage and advised Maria to dress herself in man's clothing to escape detection on the journey. Mrs. Marten watched them depart in the direction of the Red Barn on Corder's property whence they proposed to proceed by gig to Ipswich. Two days later, William was seen again in the village and he asserted that, as the licence did not permit them to marry for several weeks, Maria was spending the intervening period with a friend. William's remaining brother James now died, and until September of that year he remained in the village and worked on the farm, though no news of Maria was received. William's health now seemed to be declining and he announced that he proposed to take a holiday. Before leaving the village, he sold an estate which was part of his legacy from his father and for this received £1,250 which, together with the amounts which had reverted to him after the death of his brothers, rendered him of independent means. It was recalled that prior to his departure, he was most insistent that the Red Barn should be filled with stocks of grain and he personally supervised the storage of it. Letters purporting to be jointly written by William and Maria, but actually the sole work of the former, were received during the next few weeks and the couple were supposed to be living together in the Isle of Wight, though it was noticed that the letters always bore the London postmark. After a time, however, no further news reached the village and suspicions were aroused by the fact that Maria had not communicated with her family personally for such a long period. The mode of their departure and the continued secrecy seemed to be all the more alarming when the various incidents of their acquaintance came to be discussed. Mrs. Marten declared that she had dreamed more than once that her step-daughter was buried in the Red Barn. No particular attention was paid at first to her protestations but when time passed and it began to be realised that it was a highly suspicious circumstance that Maria had made no effort to gain news of her little boy of whom she

had been found, Thomas Marten and some of the villagers obtained permission to search the Red Barn as a preliminary step in the investigation of the mystery. This was done on April 19th, 1828, and when the floor was cleared, it was found that one patch was not so hard as the rest. On digging at this spot, they first found a shawl which was recognised as the one which Maria had been wearing just before she left home. Further excavations revealed a human body which, although in an advanced stage of decomposition, was recognised as that of Maria Marten. At the inquest, Mr. John Lawden, the surgeon who examined the remains, gave evidence that a handkerchief was found round the neck "which appeared to have been tied extremely tight, and beneath the folds, a wound was visible in the throat, which had evidently been inflicted by some sharp instrument. There was also a wound in the orbit of the right eye; and it seemed as if something had been thrust in which had fractured the small bones and penetrated the brain." Maria's younger sister, Ann, gave the information that William was in possession of a gun when he came to take Maria away to Ipswich nearly a year previously. Further evidence seemed to make it quite definite that Corder was the murderer and a constable was instructed to proceed to London to find and arrest him. Maria was buried in the churchyard at Polstead and hundreds of people from the neighbourhood attended the funeral.

On leaving Polstead, Corder had travelled to London and shortly after his arrival there, he advertised in the *Morning Herald* (November 13th, 1827) and the *Sunday Times* (November 25th, 1827) as follows: "Matrimony. A Private Gentleman, aged 24, entirely independent, whose disposition is not to be exceeded, has lately lost the chief of his family by the hand of Providence, which has occasioned discord among the remainder, under circumstances most disagreeable to relate. To any female of respectability, who would study for domestic comfort, and willingly confide her future happiness in one very qualified to render the marriage state desirable, as the advertiser is in affluence, the lady must have the power of some property which may remain in her own possession. Many very happy marriages have taken place through means similar to this now resorted to, and it is hoped that no one will answer this through impertinent curiosity; but should this meet the eye of any agreeable lady, who feels desirous of meeting with a sociable, tender, kind and sympathetic companion, they will find this advertisement worthy of notice. Honour and secrecy may be relied on. As some little security against idle applications, it is requested that letters may be addressed (post-paid) to A.Z., care of Mr. Foster, stationer, No. 68, Leadenhall Street, which will meet with the most respectful attention." Ninety-five ladies replied to this offer. Corder only claimed the forty-five letters sent in respect of the first advertisement and never called for those in answer to the notice in the *Sunday Times*. Among the replies which he received was one from a lady whom he already knew, a Miss Mary Moore, and shortly afterwards they were married at St. Andrew's Church,

Holborn. They lived at Grove House, Ealing Lane, Brentford, and the young Mrs. Corder used part of this establishment as a school for girls. Corder himself appears to have taken little part in the running of the school, but on the other hand, he made no effort to obtain any employment, even though his finances seem to have been in a parlous state. Although he was in possession of a considerable sum of money when he left Polstead, shortly after taking up residence at Brentford, he presented a forged cheque for £93 at a local bank.

It was on April 22nd, 1828, that a police officer of Lambeth Street was successful in tracing Corder to his home in Brentford. When questioned whether he was acquainted with Maria Marten of Polstead, he denied that he had any knowledge of such a person, even by name. When the house was searched, a brace of pistols was found in a velvet bag which was identified by Mrs. Marten as belonging to her step-daughter. A dagger was also found and a cutler recognised it as one that he had ground for the prisoner a few days before the murder. Corder was taken to Polstead and at the Coroner's inquest a verdict of Wilful Murder was returned against him. During the time that he was in jail awaiting trial, another charge was brought against him—that of forgery upon the bank at Brentford—but this charge was withdrawn thanks to the influence and assistance of friends of the family. Corder's wife visited him almost daily and did not waver in her belief in his innocence.

The trial began on August 7th, 1828, in the Shire Hall, Bury St. Edmunds. In spite of heavy rainfall, great crowds assembled as early as five o'clock, though the trial was not due to commence until nine. The following extract from the "Chronicles of Crime" gives some idea of the interest that the case had aroused: "At the moment his Lordship (The Lord Chief Baron) gained admission to the court, the scene which presented itself beggars description. The barristers who attended the circuit, amongst whom were to be observed the counsel for the prosecution and the defence, in vain struggled against the pressure of the opposing crowd, and many of them, at the moment they had almost attained their object, were carried back in an exhausted state to the extremest verge of the assembled multitude. When his Lordship had taken his seat on the bench, the names of the jury who had been summoned to try the prisoner were called over; but the crowd was so great and the sheriff's force so ineffective, that it was almost impossible to make way for them into the court. They were after the lapse of nearly an hour brought over the heads of the crowd into the passage leading into the hall; some with their coats torn, their shoes off, and nearly fainting." The trial lasted two days. A more thorough examination of the remains showed that Maria had been strangled with her own scarf and a wound in the neck proved that she had been shot with a pistol, the ball having entered just above the jugular on the one side and taken an oblique course to the eye on the opposite side of the head. There was also a stab wound in the neck and another between the ribs on the left side which penetrated the heart.

Corder pleaded Not Guilty, and in a speech which he read in his own defence and which lasted over half an hour, he maintained that he and Maria had quarrelled when they arrived at the Red Barn and, as he turned to leave her, he heard a pistol shot. When he went back, he found that she was already dead and, panic-stricken, he foolishly buried the body beneath the floor of the barn. His efforts proved of no avail, however, for the jury unanimously found him guilty of murder and he was sentenced to be hanged, the body afterwards to be "dissected and anatomised." On August 10th, the day before his execution, Corder wrote a document in which he confessed that he had murdered Maria by shooting her. The crowd that assembled to witness the execution is said to have numbered about seven thousand and a large number proceeded to the Shire Hall afterwards to view the body on the ventral surface of which crucial incisions had been made. The next day the body was removed to the West Suffolk General Hospital for dissection. The rope used for the hanging was auctioned and as much as a guinea an inch was obtained for it. Large sums were also offered for the pistol and dagger which Corder had used, but these passed into the possession of the sheriff and subsequently were housed at Moyse's Hall Museum at Bury St. Edmunds. A copy of James Curtis's account of the murder and trial was bound in Corder's own skin and this, together with part of his scalp, can be seen in the same museum. The skeleton was exhibited publicly at the hospital for some time and the following account appeared in a local newspaper in 1841: "The skeleton of Corder, the murderer, has been placed in a recess of the museum of the Suffolk Infirmary, Bury St. Edmunds. It is covered with a glass case, beneath which is a box for contributions. Every visitor is expected to put silver into this box, which money is applied to the wants of the necessitous patients. By an ingeniously constructed spring, the arm of the skeleton points towards the box as soon as the visitors approach it. The receipts are said to average £50 per annum. (The ingenuity seems to us to be much misapplied. There are few females who would not be terrified at such an exhibition and in some cases it might obviously produce very serious consequences)." Later, the skeleton was used to illustrate lectures at the hospital, but in October, 1949, a newspaper announcement that the hospital was desirous of disposing of these bones was brought to the writer's notice by Mr. S. Wood, Assistant Librarian at the College, and the skeleton was presented to the Royal College of Surgeons and has been placed next to that of Jonathan Wild in Room 1.

The story of William Corder and Maria Marten has formed the basis of numerous ballads, plays and an anonymous novel. Even so recently as 1927, the play was presented in London and proved a great attraction, as did also the broadcast version in 1934.

Corder was small in stature, being only 5 ft. 3 inches tall. (Fig. 2). The vault of the skull is of a regular broad, oval outline, with a well-marked lambdoid depression. The sutures of the vault are open both

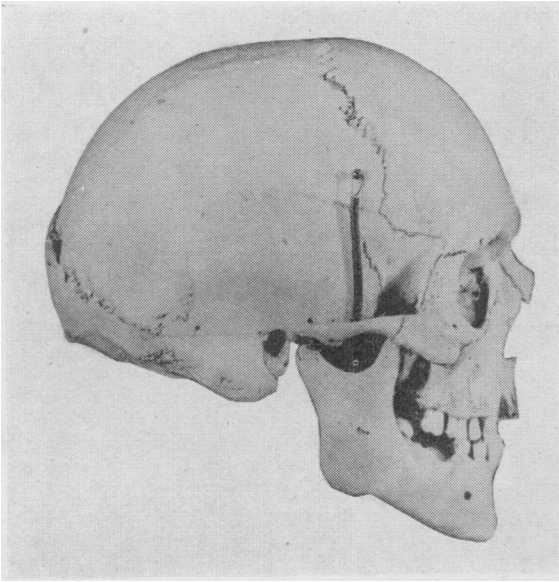


Fig. 2.

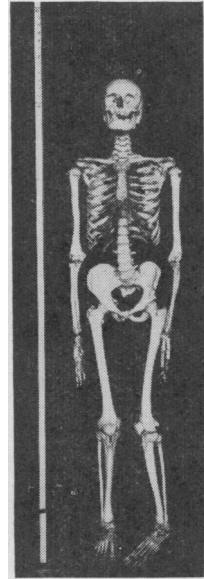


Fig. 3.

within and without. The basilar suture is obliterated. The third molars have been erupted, but are not in the occlusal plane. The first upper molar of the left side and both first lower molars have been lost during life. The jaws and teeth are small: the palate high and narrow. The forehead is rather high, the orbits markedly oblique. The facial bones are slender, though the signs of sex are unequivocal. The chin is fairly prominent and rounded. Of anatomical peculiarities, it may be noted that the temporal lines are unusually high for so small-jawed a skull and that a complicated series of six wormian bones occupies the posterior end of the sagittal and median portion of the lambdoid sutures. (Fig. 3).

Measurements of the skull :

Length	..	..	..	..	..	187 mm.
Breadth	..	..	..	..	..	140 mm.
Height	..	..	..	..	..	130 mm.

Cranial Capacity, as determined by Manouvrier's formula .. 1,500 ccs.

REFERENCES

GIBBS, DOROTHY and MALTBY, HERBERT *The true story of Maria Marten*. Ipswich. 1949.
 PELHAM, CAMDEN *The Chronicles of Crime*. 1887.